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SUBJECT: TURKISH-GEORGIAN RELATIONS: DEEPER AND DEEPER

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11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT. Turkish MFA Deputy Undersecretary Unal Cevikoz (a former Ambassador to Baku) visits Washington from June 18-20 for consultations on South Caucasus and Central Asia. Cevikoz is likely to identify the strengthening relationship between Turkey and Georgia as a major component of Turkey's strategy to promote regional integration and economic development in the South Caucasus -- a strategy he recognizes is hindered by the lack of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia, and by other "frozen conflicts" in the region, notably Abkhazia. Cevikoz, who has remarked that the UN "friends" process (in which Turkey does not directly participate) has lost its perception of impartiality, may seek to share new ideas with Washington for lessening tensions between the two sides. Given their deepening ties and cultural bonds, Turkey may be able to influence Georgia's approach to Russia and play a constructive role in the Abkhaz conflict. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

CREATING INTERDEPENDENCE

12. (C) Turkey was the first nation to recognize Georgian independence; it serves as Georgia's window to the west and its bridge to Euro-Atlantic institutions. Turkey is playing a substantial role in developing the Georgian economy and encouraging free-market reforms. In a recent show of support, FM Gul traveled to Georgia on May 26 for the inauguration of Batumi International Airport, where he met with President Saakashvili and Ajara Autonomous Republic PM Varsolomidze. The airport, which will be used jointly by Turkey and Georgia, was built by the same Turkish-Georgian TAV-Urban consortium that built the Tbilisi International Airport. Turkish and Georgian citizens will move through the bi-national airport free of border controls (visa requirements between the two countries have already been scrapped), and flights to Turkey will operate as if domestic. The joint-use airport is only the latest symbol of growing Turkish-Georgian interdependence. From energy and transport to free trade and investment, the two countries, often in partnership with Azerbaijan, have developed an impressive record of cooperation. Turkey is now Georgia's largest (non-oil and gas) trading partner, and a growing market for goods no longer exported to Russia, including Georgian wine.

¶3. (C) MFA officials are very positive about Turkey-Georgia relations. The major issues on the agenda are the completion of a free trade agreement (FTA), an agreement eliminating double-taxation on investment, and the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway. MFA lauded Georgia's accomplishments since the Rose Revolution, citing its impressive record of liberalization. Turkish companies operating in Georgia, they said, do not face the same bureaucratic obstacles as before 2003. On Batumi Airport, MFA noted, the Ajara region where the airport is located was once majority Muslim and part of Turkey, but lost its autonomy and demographic composition under Soviet rule. Not wanting a territorial conflict with Georgia, Turkey has supported the region's autonomous structure within Georgia, and Turkish investment is fast developing the region. MFA added that Turkish-Georgian cooperation on Batumi may extend to the construction of a new seaport.

¶4. (C) In addition to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, the three countries are also cooperating on a regional railway. PM Erdogan signed the framework agreement in February, and Azerbaijan has agreed to finance the Georgian leg of the project. MFA believes construction will start before the end of the summer. The Georgian DCM told us the railway was not Georgia's highest priority, but the GOG accepted it as a condition for the completion of the gas pipeline, which Georgia believes is critical to its energy independence. He commented that Georgia is concerned that the tripartite projects may deepen Armenia's isolation. Dr. Mitat Celikpala of TOBB Economics and Technology University, an expert on Turkey-Georgia relations, echoed that assessment in a separate meeting, noting that the railway project would alter centuries-old transportation routes that previously connected Turkey and Armenia, reducing Turkey's economic incentives to open the border with Armenia.

¶5. (C) MFA expressed satisfaction with the FTA the two countries are negotiating, although the Georgians appear more committed to the process. Speaking at a Turkish think tank on May 23, Georgian First Deputy PM Chechelashvili underscored his country's ambition for "full scale liberalization without exceptions." According to the Georgian DCM, Turkey, on the other hand, is raising concerns over agriculture and offering only the incomplete equivalent of the FTA it gave to Balkan countries. While Georgia initiated the FTA, Turkey is the stronger supporter of an agreement on avoidance of double taxation. According to MFA and Georgian officials, Georgia is now in a more stable fiscal position and better able to weather any tax revenue losses from eliminating double taxation on Turkish investors.

REPATRIATION OF THE MESKHETI TURKS

¶6. (C) The repatriation of the Meskhети, or Ahiska, Turks to Georgia from Russia and Central Asia, where they were exiled during Soviet times, is a high priority issue for the GOT. Gul raised the issue with Saakashvili at their May 26 meeting. Despite Turkey's frustration with Georgia's inability to pass legislation allowing resettlement, MFA is sensitive to Georgian concerns. MFA officials assert there are approximately 200,000 Meskhети Turks, but it is unclear how many would return. The Turks acknowledge returning to their homeland in the Javakheti region would upset the demographic balance of that ethnic Armenian-majority region. A bill currently in the Georgian parliament aims to resettle the Meskhети Turks throughout Georgia.

TURKEY AND ITS CIRCASSIAN DIASPORA: NOT EYE-TO-EYE ON ABKHAZIA

¶7. (C) Turkey has long standing cultural and historical ties to Abkhazia. We met recently with Cihan Candemir, board member of Yuksel Insaat (a Turkish construction giant that sub-contracted on, among other projects, the U.S. Embassies in Tbilisi and Yerevan). Candemir is president of the

Federation of Circassian Associations, which includes 56 different Circassian cultural associations based throughout Turkey. He estimates there are about 5 million people of Circassian descent living in Turkey (though the extent to which they self-identify as Circassian varies). These associations help to maintain the cultural and linguistic heritage of Caucasian peoples in Turkey and the Federation is affiliated with similar Circassian groups in other countries, including Russia, Jordan and Syria. Candemir said that it is not the intent of his federation to interfere with the internal politics of other countries, but added that his members are very close to Abkhazia and their views are "in parallel" with the Abkhaz administration.

18. (C) While Turkey officially supports Georgia vis-a-vis Abkhazia, Candemir views this position as lacking in vision and ignoring Abkhazia's unique history and geography. Why, he asked, is Turkey mediating conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but not next door? He regrets that Turkey does not meet officially with Abkhazia's president. Referring to Abkhazia's ultimate independence, Candemir said, "even if you're scared to death, it won't delay death." According to Candemir, the Circassian diaspora is seeking to improve the democratic and economic situation in Abkhazia, but their activities conflict with GOT policies. Georgian coastal patrols, with ships donated by Turkey, "harass" ferries carrying Turks to Abkhazia, he claimed. Our MFA contacts, while acknowledging Georgia's right to patrol its borders, also expressed some frustration with Georgia's vigilance (one Turkish captain is in a Georgian prison), which antagonizes the local Circassian community. Candemir also complained that Turkey's pro-Georgian policy is driving Abkhazia into the arms of Russia.

19. (C) MFA officials told us that they would like to play a mediating role in the region, and believe they have made useful proposals. Georgia, they regretted, has not approved

most of these offers. Professor Celikpala separately noted that Turkey has not received a green-light from the U.S. or EU to mediate, something he believes Turkey needs.

DON'T POKE THE BEAR

10. (C) Georgia's perceived provocation of Russia at times annoys the Turks, who value regional stability above all. MFA officials quipped that Georgians tend towards the "megalomaniacal," and "see something more than themselves when they look in the mirror." MFA contacts also noted a Georgian tendency to inflate refugee figures. For its part, Georgia recognizes that Turkey's support in its disagreements with Russia is not unequivocal. The Georgian DCM complained about the GOT's failure to deliver gas during the energy crisis caused last winter by Russia's suspension of shipments. He recalled spending eight hours in the Ministry of Energy one evening trying to convince Turkish officials of a formula that would allow Georgia to adequately repay Turkey for advanced shipments of natural gas. He singled out Turkish Energy Minister Guler for his lack of support. (COMMENT: The GOT claimed, during that episode, that it was unable to bear the political and economic cost of financing cheap gas to Georgia, while paying top price to Russia for its own gas. The GOT claimed that Georgia's offer to compensate Turkey with electricity was not economically or technically viable. In any case, new Shah Deniz gas from Azerbaijan was delayed, rendering the point moot. END COMMENT)

NATO, BLACK SEA COOPERATION

11. (C) Turkish officials tell us the GOT supports Georgia's accession to NATO, but is concerned the Alliance will inherit Georgia's internal conflicts. The Georgian DCM described Turkey's support for its NATO bid as "adequate." Georgia already benefits from Turkish military and police training. On the Black Sea, however, the Georgian DCM underlined differences between Georgia and Turkey over security

cooperation. Georgia is an unenthusiastic participant in BLACKSEAFOR (reftel), and in any case has few assets to offer. The Georgian DCM also asserted that Operation Black Sea Harmony joint maneuvers among Turkey, Russia and Ukraine do not include full information sharing with NATO. In contrast to Turkey, Georgia agrees with Bulgaria and Romania that NATO should not be excluded from the Black Sea. He noted with some concern the anti-NATO sentiment emerging from some circles in Turkey, citing the retired generals who had recently called for Turkey's withdrawal from the Alliance.

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